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**Health, Education, and Human Services Committee
approves legislation to amend the Navajo Nation Veterans Trust Fund**

Legislation would allow for annual construction of 15 homes in each of the five Navajo agencies

DILKON, Ariz. – On Wednesday, the Health, Education, and Human Services Committee approved Legislation No. 0193-13, a bill seeking to amend the Navajo Nation Veterans Trust Fund, 12 N.N.C. §1171.

Proposed amendments would provide for the equal distribution of the annual comprehensive budgeted amount between the Navajo Nation Veterans Affairs Trust Fund and the Department of Navajo Veteran Affairs, to construct 15 homes and to provide minor renovations and repairs for Navajo Veterans in each of the five agencies for the next four years.

Legislation sponsor Council Delegate Alton Joe Shepherd (Jeddito, Cornfields, Ganado, Kin Dah Lichíí, Steamboat) explained that he has received support and recommendations from representatives of the five Navajo agencies.

“The chapters each have a waiting list of veterans, waiting to have a home built,” said Delegate Shepherd. “By utilizing the 2014 fiscal year revenue projections, we can start building 15 homes every year for the next four years, that’s 300 homes across the Navajo Nation.”

In order to begin the process of designating funds for the construction of homes, Delegate Shepherd is attempting to change the codification of veteran housing assistance.

Speaking in support of the bill, HEHSC member Council Delegate Kenneth Maryboy (Mexican Water, Aneth, Teecnospos, Tólikan, Red Mesa) asked for Delegate Shepherd to revise the bill to prevent future inefficiencies.

“I work with veterans from my chapters, and they have grown extremely frustrated to the point where they don’t even come to meetings anymore,” said Delegate Maryboy. “This legislation is needed in each of my chapters.”

Delegate Maryboy noted that efforts to assist chapter veterans come to a halt once they reach the Local Governance Support Center, housed under the Navajo Nation Division of Community Development.

HEHSC member Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi To ii) also expressed his support for the bill, while questioning whether funds could be utilized for chapters located on Navajo partitioned lands.

“As a member of the Navajo-Hopi Land Commission, we have faced challenges when assisting those chapters due to the land status. It would be useful to also include language that allows for funds to be utilized by those chapters,” said Delegate Phelps.

Although HEHSC members said they believe the bill was drafted with the good intentions, HEHSC member Council Delegate Dwight Witherspoon (Black Mesa, Forest Lake, Hardrock, Pinon, Whippoorwill) was concerned that the legislation would create unhealthy expectations among veterans.

“I would like to see veterans be encouraged to participate and qualify for the other housing programs, so that we might expand the amount we are able to assist,” said Delegate Witherspoon. “I also do not want these funds centralized in the individual agencies.”

At the conclusion of the discussion, HEHSC vice chair Council Delegate Charles Damon II (Bááháálí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Tsé Lichíí, Rock Springs, Tsayatoh) commended Delegate Shepherd for sponsoring the legislation.

It separates the Nation’s dependence on Navajo Housing Authority’s federal funding, according to Delegate Damon.

In response to the comments of HEHSC members, Delegate Shepherd assured his colleagues that the bill will address each of their concerns by the time the legislation reaches the Naabik’íyáti’ Committee.

HEHSC members approved Legislation No. 0193-13 with a vote of 3-1.

The bill now moves forward to the Budget and Finance Committee, Law and Order Committee, Naabik’íyáti’ Committee, and the 22nd Navajo Nation Council for final consideration.

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